DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 241 980 CS 504 563

AUTHOR Williamson, Juanita V.; Thompson, C. Lamar
TITLE Little Known Facts about Yesterday's Impact on Today's Speech.
PUB DATE Feb 84
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Southeastern Conference on English in the Two-Year College (19th, Arlington, VA, February 16-18, 1984).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Dialects; Black History; *Cultural Influences; *Diachronic Linguistics; *Dialect Studies; Ethnology; *Language Patterns; Language Usage; *Language Variation; Social Influences; Speech Communication; Speech Habits

ABSTRACT

Two major theories trace the origins of black English to African influence or British Isles influence. According to the African origin theory, black English was created through pidginization, creolization, and decreolization as Africans came into contact with Europeans through the slave trade. The second theory holds that most black English characteristics resulted from slaves' close and consistent contact with white overseers and plantation owners of British origin, who undoubtedly used these features in their speech as did their forebears. The black English canon includes some fifty features. For each example, such as the omission of the "-s" inflection in the present tense or the nonstandard uses of the verb "be," identical usage can be found among white colonists of the same or earlier time period, who came predominantly from south and southwest England. Those who hold to the theory of African influence on black speech are forced to construct a long, complex model to account for the current state of black speech. The theory of British Isles influence, on the other hand, is not only neater and more compact, but appears to be more consistent with existing data. (HOD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED241980

LITTLE KNOWN FACTS ABOUT YESTERDAY'S IMPACT ON TODAY'S SPEECH

Juanita V. Williamson
LeMoyne-Owen College
and
C. Lamar Thompson
Memphis State University

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Charles Lamar

Thompson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS 504 563

LITTLE KNOWN FACTS ABOUT YESTERDAY'S IMPACT ON TODAY'S SPEECH

Juanita V. Williamson
LeMoyne-Owen College
and
C. Lamar Thompson
Memphis State University

Almost none of the recent studies done by sociolinquists of "Black English"[1] are really comparative studies of black and white speech. Typically, the studies contrast the speech of blacks with a monolithic standard English. The assumption in them is that the white speakers speak standard English. Thus, standard English and "White English" are considered synonymous terms; black speakers speak something else. McDavid and McDavid, however, have reported that if the speech of blacks and whites within the South and with socioeconomic status held comparable are investigated these alleged differences would all but disappear.[2]

The historical issue involves the controversy between two theories about the origins of "Black English": African influence and British Isles influence. According to the African origins of "Black English," West Africans and Europeans came into contact through the slave trade. Communication between the two groups developed using the most basic elements of both languages. This process, called pidginization, created a language that continued to serve as a form of communication for Africans in the New World. Since slaves belonged to many different tribes and spoke different languages, they used Pidgin to communicate with the slave owners and among themselves.

---

*This paper was presented at the Southeastern Conference on English in the Two-Year College(Arlington, VA,, February, 1984). Appreciation is expressed to Richard Brehm of Memphis State University for his assistance.

Some scholars contend that because many West African languages have similar structures and lexicons, the English that the slaves learned was processed through a mutual linguistic system and ultimately developed into a "Black English" speech variety that exists even today. As subsequent generations of slaves learned this pidginized variety of English, it became the first language of African offspring born in the New World. This process, called creolization, added other features of English to transform the Pidgin into a full-fledged language, called a Creole. As Afro-Americans came into more direct contact with the dominant Anglo culture, gained greater access to formal education, and acquired stronger motivation for using Vernacular English less frequently, the Creole began to lose some of its African features, exhibiting the process called decreolization.[3]

The second theory holds that most of the "Black English" characteristics resulted from close and consistent contact of slaves with white overseers and plantation owners of British origin, who undoubtedly used these features in their speech as did their forebears. Some scholars have concluded that "Black English" is a carry-over from this contact.[4] This approach is supported by the American Dialect Atlas and by linguists such as Raven McDavid who account for forms of Black speech in terms of survivals from British dialects.[5]

Many of the sociolinquists, including Shuy, Labov, Dillard, Stewart, and Smitherman, hold that "Black English" is derived from a Pidgin which became a Creole and thus has little relationship to standard English or any dialect of American English. However, the studies

have shown that the researchers have not investigated early English in America or the English at the time the settlers left for the new world.

The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the features of black speech which are included in current studies. These features have come to be known as "Black English." The "Black English" canon includes some fifty features. Because of the time limitation, this paper will examine some of those outstanding features which are most frequently attributed to "Black English." One of the more common of these features is the omission of the -s inflection in the present tense; e.g., "She have us say it," "My Mama do it all the time." Some linquists argue that these are distinctly Black utterances. Burling[6] writes that in the loss of third person singular blacks are surely the innovator, although the records show that such forms as "he do" used at the time the settlers left for the new world were not low class English. This same trait can be found as early as the 16th century in Queen Elizabeth's personal diary: "as your secretary term it."[7] The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) notes that "the form he do is now southwest dialect;" while "have" as a third person singular form is now East Anglian dialect. But in earlier periods, these forms were even more widespread. From the 16th Century come examples such as" Of monks have it gotten a purgatory . . . Of the university have it caught all subtilties" (John Bales, Selected Works, 1547); and "The race that every man . . . have to run" (William Cunningham, The Cosmographical Glasse, 1559). Later examples are also found: "Sir Arthur Haselrigge do not yet appear in the House" is found in Pepys' Diary (1660). The negative form "He don't know you" appears in

Richardson's Pamela (1741). As late as 1831, the phrase "God don't suffer them now" can be found in a history, England under Seven Administrations, by Albany Fonblanque.[8]

Although the examples cited so far have all been from English sources, it is known that this loss of the -s inflection crossed the ocean with the early colonists. In the United States, according to Atwood, the forms "he do" and "he don't" were distinctly Southern by 1790.[9] Eliason notes the following example from a source dated 1833: "A person do not no what the can undergoe till they are tryed." writer is an educated, white Southerner.[10]

Another prominent feature supposed to be distinctly Black is a variety of nonstandard uses of the verb be. One of these is the use of "be" as the sole form of the present tense (i.e., I be, you be, he be, we be, they be). However, this usage is well-documented as an acceptable alternative in standard English. Miege's The English Grammar (1688) notes that "be" and "are" are equally acceptable as the plural form of the present tense.[11] Greenwood, in his Practical English Grammar (1711), writes that the verb "has a double or twofold formation," i.e., "I am, thou art, he is. Plural. We are, ye are, they are, or; I be, Thou be'st, He be. Plural. We be, Ye be, They be."[12] In Lowth's Short Introduction to English Grammar (1762), I be, thou beest, he is, we be, ye be, they be are given as acceptable standard forms.[13] As late as 1828, Noah Webster notes that the usage I be, you be, he is, we be, ye or you be, they be "is the most ancient [form] and is still very general in popular practice."[14]

The OED cites dozens of examples of these usages of the verb form "be." These include Chaucer: "We . . . Be now disclaundered" (Legend of Good Women); Shakespeare: "Where be thy brothers?" (Richard III); and Milton: "Ego, tu, sui be of the first Declension (Accedence). The OED notes that "be" as the present tense form of the verb is "now the regular form in southern and some midland dialects. The negative. . . is in even more widely use dialectually."

A second nonstandard usage of the be verb, supposedly found only in "Black English," is the use of "is" in the present tense--I is, you is, we is, they is. But again, this is another example of an English dialect being transported to American shores. According to the OED, "in the northern dialect, Middle English and modern es, is, ys, is used for all persons of the singular, and also for the plural . . . ." Among the examples cited are Chaucer's "I is as ill a millere as are ye" (Reeves Tale), and Shakespeare's "Ill deeds is doubled with an evil word" (Comedy of Errors) and "Is all things well, According as I gave directions?" (2 Henry VI).

This usage was also found in America, even among the best educated. In Tarheel Talk, Eliason points out: "On the cultivated level one of the more striking characteristics of earlier usage is the frequent lack of concord between subject and verb;" for example, "Miss Lyon and Mr. Swan is soon to enter" (1770) and "the other boys is to have" (1820).[15]

A third nonstandard usage of the be verb that is labeled "Black English" is the past form of be; i.e., "That's when we was doing the poems . . . ." Here again the OED shows that this is not so: "The

plural had formerly also was; almost universally so in 16-18th c. with you when used as a singular. Still dialect in all persons." A number of illustrations are given including: Fortescue (c. 1460), "Whan thay came togeders, thay was . . . occupyyd with their own maters" (Works); Shakespeare (1588), "There was more than one . . . I, more there was" (Titus Andronicus); Walpole (1735), "When you was at Eton" (Correspondence); Fielding (1749) "What was you reading when I came in?" (Tom Jones); and Austen (1811) "I felt sure that you was angry with me" (Sense and Sensibility).

A fourth nonstandard usage of be found in "Black English" occurs with the omission of forms of be as an auxiliary, particularly in direct questions. But this same usage also occurs among white speakers of standard English. Examples from literature and the press are numerous. "You willing to come down?" (Lewis, Babbitt, p. 73). "You set now, boy?" (Miller, Death of a Salesman, p. 397). "You coming to the Crusade?" (nationally known evangelist, Memphis Press Scimitar, June 12, 1969). "'What you doing here?' he asked. 'What you doing here?' the others countered." (The Commercial Appeal, September 19, 1969).[16]

A third feature used to characterize "Black English" is the use of the past participle of a verb for the simple past tense form; i.e., "I seen him yesterday." But again, there is nothing distinctly black about this usage. The OED lists dozens of examples--one from the 16th century: "When the Skottes and the Kettericke seen our men sketer" (in Chetham Society Miscellany II). The 18th century grammarian, Robert Lowth, condemns this usage, but points out that it "is too much

authorized by some of our best Writers." As examples of this, he cites Pope: "A second deluge learning thus o'er-run,/And the Monks finish'd what the Goths begun." (Essay on Criticism), and "Rapt into future times the bard begun" (Messian)-- and Addison--"The men begun to embellish themselves" (Spectator, No. 434).[17]

Related to this nonstandard usage is the replacement of the past participle with the past tense form. "The man had came" is an example from "Black English." But Lowth notes that this "error" is even more common than its opposite. He cites numerous examples drawn from the works of the greatest authors of his day: Milton, Dryden, Atterbury, Clarendon, Addison, Prior, Swift, and Gay. Some of his shorter examples follow:

"He would have spoke."
(Milton, Paradise Lost, x, 517)

"And in triumph had rode."
(Milton, Paradise Regained, iii, 165)

"Mr. Misson has wrote."
(Addison, Preface to His Travels)

"No civil broils have since his death arose."
(Dryden, On Oliver Cromwell)

"This nimble operator will have stole it."
(Swift, Tale of a Tub, Sect. x)

"Ev'n there he should have fell."[18]
(Prior, Solomon)

What was a common usage in 18th century England retained a strong hold on the speech of 18th and 19th century American Southerners. The substitution of the past tense for the past participle is found many times in Southern documents. Eliason notes several of these: "We

have not yet began to study the English Grammars" (1795); "I have wrote you" (1766); "We had went and talk with him" (1856).[19]

This last example illustrates another of the features of "Black English" that is also found among white speakers--the omission of the -ed inflection in the past tense.

A third nonstandard usage of the past tense that is ascribed to "Black English" is the addition of the -ed past tense forms. But a study of the OED reveals that such influections are quite common in several English dialects and are frequently found in writings from the 17th and 18th centuries. For example, "I . . . runned and hollered all I knowed" (T. Hughes, Scouring of the White Horse, 1859); "Outward necessities ... drived many to seek Christ" (R. Baxter, Paraphrase on the New Testament, 1685); "I lay abed all next day . . . and rised on Thursday" (D. Osborne, Letters, 1653); "Then they . . . put out the Candle, and ringed the Bell" (J. Ayliffe, Parergon Juris Canonici Anglicani, 1726).

Another feature which is claimed to be distinctive of "Black English" is the omission of the -s plural inflection; e.g., "Scientist are inventing many thing." However, Eliason finds this same usage in the writings of cultivated, white Southerners. He cites examples such as "almost two month" (1791), "two day" (1837), and "thirty-five day" (1852).[20]

Some linguists note that the use of pronouns by blacks often differs from standard usage. This is considered to be distinctive of "Black English." But this is a common problem among all users of the

language, not just those speaking "Black English". One illustration they give is in the use of the reflexive pronoun: "He should do it hisself." However, the OED notes that this usage is "prevalent in the dialects" and gives numerous examples, including Dickens' " Gorging hisself with vittles "(Nicholas Nickleby). A second illustration points out the confusion over the nominative and accusative forms of the personal pronouns: "Me and him is going." Again, the OED notes that this usage is "now only dialect and vulgar;" it draws upon Dickens for example: "Me and Mrs. Boffin stood the poor girl's friend" (Our Mutual Friend). Furthermore, even the most educated have problems with their pronouns: "Is it him?" (Edmund Burke, "Letters ... on the Proposals for peace with the Regicide Directory of France"); "No man had ever more discernment than him in finding out the ridiculous" (Samuel Johnson, Dissertation on Greek Comedy).

Two additial illustrations of "Black English" often cited are the use of "it" as an expletive:" It's four boys and two girls in the family;" and the use of pronominal apposition: "My brother, he have a new car." Examples of these usages can be found in old ballads--"Itt was a blind beggar, had long lost his sight" (Percy, Reliques); "The first man that did answer make, Was noble Percy hee" (Chevy Chase)--and in more modern works that utilize ballad conventions: "It is an ancient mariner, And he stoppeth one of three" (Coleridge, Rime of the Ancient Mariner); "The skipper he stood beside the helm" (Longfellow, Wreck of the Hesperus). This last example is echoed in the writing of an educated North Carolinian of the same era (1830's): "Fry he concluded he would go."[21]

Another feature that is used to distinguish "Black English" is the dropping of the -s from adverbs as in "alway" and "sometime". If this is so, then the King James Bible must have been written by black clergymen. For this most famous and influential of all English Bibles contains lines such as 'And loe, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world" (Matt., 28:20); and "My time is not yet come; but your time is alway ready" (John 7:6). According to the OED, the usage "sometime" was common in the 16th and 17th centuries. Shakespeare, himself, used it occasionally: "Sometime, the Flood prevailes; and than the Winde' (3Henry VI, II, v, 9); and "Sometimes fashioning them like Pharaoes souldiours..., sometime like god Bels priests..., sometime like tne shaven Hercules" (Much Ado, III, iii).

Some linquists classify the usage of a pronoun form instead of a demonstrative adjective as "Black English;" for example, they cite "them boys." While the OED labels this usage dialect or illiterate, such usage is not restricted to blacks. British novelists often included it in the speech of the characters; "I hope, then the agent will give you encouragement about them mines"(M. Edgweworth, Absentee); "It was a rare rise we got out of them chaps" (Thackeray, Catherine).

J.L. Dillard has noted the pronunciation "ax" instead of "ask" as being characteristically Black. For illustration he cites "And I ax her, How you do, my mudder?"[22] However, as the OED attests, "ax, down to nearly 1650 [was] the regular literary form, and [it is] still used everywhere in middle and southern dialects, though supplanted in standard English by ask, originally the northern form." Examples of

this usage are abundant. The OED cites several examples from Chaucer, including "Now lovyeres axe I this question" (Knight's Tale); and from Coverdale's Bible of 1535, including "Axe and it shalbe given you" (Matt., 6:7) and "It is axed at the mouth of the wyse" (Ecclus., 21:17). Although "ax" had disappeared from the written language of the 17th century, it remained in the vernacular of many Englishmen. In this form it was transported to the New World. Atwood claims that "ax' was the regular form for "ask" in the folk speech of the western quarter of North Carolina in the 18th century.[23]

Several scholars have written that speakers of "Black English' use the phrase "I'mo" as in "I'mo go" to indicate a future action. Again, however, as McMillan has argued, this usage is not restricted to blacks: "A Southerner can say 'I'mo do it.'. He does not say 'I am going to do it.'" [24]

This paper has presented numerous examples of so-called distinctive features of "Black English." For each example, it has been shown that the identical usage can be found among white speakers and writers of the same or earlier time period. As each feature traces itself back either to earlier standard English or provincialisms, it soon becomes apparent that any theory of African influence must be repudiated for these features. Blacks learned their speech from colonists who come predominently from South and Southwest England. As Cleanth Brooks, noted author and critic, has pointed out: "The only alternative to this theory is to accept what amounts to a staggering coincidence."[25] Those who hold to the theory of African influence on black speech are forced to construct a long, complex model, involving

stages of piginization, crealization, and decrealization, to account for the current state of Black speech. The theory of British Isles influence is not only neater and more compact, but appears to be more consistent with the existing data.

Footnotes

1. J.L. Dillard writes that Black English is "the language of about eighty percent of Americans of African ancestry" and "differs from other varieties of American English" (Black English, 1972), p. ix. Raven McDavid defines Black English as "a cultural artifact devised by Northern white linguistic entrepreneurs with an eye on the fast buck" (The Commercial Appeal, June 7, 1980).

2. Raven McDavid and Virginia McDavid, "The Relationship of the Speech of American Negroes to the Speech of Whites." In W. Wolfram and N.Clarke (eds.) Black-White Speech Relationship. Washington, D.C., Center for Applied Linguistics, 1971.

3. Shirley lewis and Mary Hoover, Teacher Training Workshops on Black English and Language Arts Teaching, Standford Center for Research and Development in Teaching, 1979), pp. 12-13.

4. Raven McDavid and Virginia McDavid, Loc. cit. And E. Trangott, "Principles in the History of American English--A Reply", The Florida Fl Reporter, 10 Spring/Fall 1972, nos. 1-2, 5-6.

5. Geneva Smitherman, A Comparison of the Oral and Written Styles of a Group of Inner-City Black Students. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1969), p. 2.

6. Robbins Burling, English in Black and White, Holt (1973), pp. 49-50.

7. Henry Wyld, A History of Colloquial English, Oxford Press, (1936), p. 33.

8. Unless otherwise noted, examples used are from OED.

9. E. Bagby Atwood, A Survey of Verb Forms in the Eastern United States, The University of Michigan Press (1953), p. 40.

10. Normal Eliason, Tarheel Table, University of North Carolina Press (1956), p. 237.

11. Guy Miege, The English Grammar (1688). Reprinted by The Scholar Press Limited, Menston, England (1969), p. 64.

12. James Greenwood, An Essay Towards a Practical English Grammar (1711). Reprinted by The Scholar Press Limited (1968), pp. 134-135.

13. Robert Lowth, A Short Introduction to English Grammar, (1762), Reprinted by The Scholar Press Limited, Menston, England (1967), p. 51.

14. Noah Webster, An American Dictionary of the English Language, (1829). Material cited is in the introductory section of the dictionary. Reprinted by Johnson Reprint Corporation, New York (1970).

15. Eliason, p. 2136.

16. Juanita Williamson, "A Look at the Direct Question," Studies in Linguistics, University of Alabama Press (1972) pp. 208-213.

17. Lowth, p. 87.

18. Ibid., pp. 86-88.

19. Eliason, pp. 246-248.

20. Ibid., p. 234

21. Ibid., p. 253.

22. J.L. Dillard, Black English (1972), Vintage, p. 107.

23. Atwood, p. 5.

24. James B. McMillan, "Vowel Nasality as a Sandhi-Form of Morphemes - nt and -ing in Southern American, " American Speech, 14:

25. Cleanth Brooks, "The English Language of the South." Cited in A Various Language (1971), p. 139.